William E. Colby: To the CIA

'The Professional's Professional...'

By Laurence Stern
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"Call Helms and tell him to give Colby to Komer," Lyndon Johnson barked at his national security adviser, Walt W. Rostow, one day in the fall of 1967.

The Colby to whom the late President referred was William E. ("the professional's professional") Colby, who was nominated by President Nixon yesterday as new director of the Central Intelligence Agency to replace short-termer James R. Schlesinger.

The peremptory call from President Johnson to Rostow was made in the midst of a conversation between the President and his chief pacification advisor in South Vietnam, Robert W. Komer. "What do you need?" the President insistently asked Komer.

"I want a guy I can train as a successor," Komer responded. "I've got my eye on Bill Colby at the CIA."

Former CIA Director Richard M. Helms exploded when he learned of the unorthodox manner by which Komer had instigated the presidential demand for Colby's services, Komer recalled in an interview yesterday.

"I felt there was a war on and something had to be done," he said. "Dick calmed down once he got it off his chest. In fact he told me: 'You know I would have given you Colby if I had to.'"

"The professional's professional" was one admiring characterization of Colby.

"The complete *apparatchik*," was the more qualified description of an ex-foreign service officer who knew Colby during his long years of service in the Vietnam war. "He has lived his whole life in the clandestine service, and he came up through the ranks."

Stewart Alsop once wrote of the dichotomy within the Central Intelligence Agency as between the Bold Easterners and the Prudent Professionals. The first group was comprised of tweedy Grotonians with some money, social position and a touch of Anglophilia. They reigned in the pre-Bay of Pigs era.

In the second category were the professional intelligence men—specialists and technicians—who made their way on merit alone upward through the anonymous bureaucracy at Langley.

William E. Colby represents the triumph of the Prudent Professionals. He is a man of medium height and unobtrusive dress, Haspel rather than Brooks. "If he were a little taller he would look like a third Bundy brother," commented a Senate student of intelligence affairs.

Most of his professional life has been spent on the dark side of the intelligence world, the Directorate of Plans, known in the denigrative vernacular as "The Department of Dirty Tricks."

He was born in St. Paul, Minn., in 1920, the son of an Army officer. He was graduated from Princeton in 1940, and during World War II worked in the OSS under General "Wild Bill" Donovan, the most estimable of credentials for a young man who would make his career in the intelligence service.

Colby parachuted behind Nazi lines in France to work with the maquis and into northern Norway to blow up railway lines supplying German reinforcements.

But the centerpiece of his career was Vietnam, where he arrived in 1959 as "first secretary"—so described yesterday by a CIA spokesman—of the American embassy. Actually, as was well known in Saigon those days, Colby was the CIA's station chief in South Vietnam, and it was during this period that his long association with the war was first forged.

In 1962 he became chief of the Far East Division of the CIA's Directorate of Plans in Washington. The agency's role in the Indochinese conflict was paramount at the time, several years before the big U.S. military buildup.

The CIA organized an army of Meo mercenaries to battle the Vietnamese Communists in Laos. And in Vietnam the precursors of what was to be called the "pacification" program were being set into motion—the CT (counter-terror) units, the Revolutionary Development cadre, the Provincial Reconnaisance Units and then the controversial Phoenix program—all under CIA management.

[The Soviet Union said yesterday that Colby had been in charge of a program aimed at "physically exterminating" the Vietcong in South Vietnam.]

Colby was the working overseer, the Prudent Professional, in charge of developing these programs and making sure that they worked. Whatever the failure or success of Colby's intelligence handiwork may have been, they produced controversy.

The critics charged that Phoenix and the other programs accomplished little else than visiting torture and assassination on innocents while antagonizing large segments of the Vietnamese population. The proponents claimed success, and buttressed their contentions with awesome statistical data which Komer reduced to computer printouts and passed on to Washington.

Colby returned to Vietnam in March, 1968, as Komer's understudy, and the following November took over the pacification job, which was by then under the jurisdiction of the State Department.

He lived during those three years alone in Komer's spacious villa in Saigon and traveled out to the countryside almost every weekend, occasionally taking newspapermen or congressional VIPs with him. On occasions he would come back to Washington to testify on the successes of the programs for which he had been an architect and chief enforcement officer.

Colby's final stint in Vietnam ended in June, 1971, when he returned to Washington and disappeared into the CIA's sprawling home office at Langley, where he plunged into administrative work, a curiously sedentary role for the old intelligence warrior.

Last March he was named by Schlesinger to head the Directorate of Plans, where he had spent his life under various covers and often out in the cold.

Yesterday when he was named to the No. 1 spot there was cause for joy at Langley. One of their own had made it.

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